

Maud Whatley
Haunches

LIMINAL
GALLERY



On 5 April 1932 the champion Australian racehorse Phar Lap died in San Francisco. Allegedly, he had ingested a big dose of arsenic and the rumour spread that he had been poisoned. Sixteen days earlier the horse had won the most lucrative race in the world - the Agua Caliente handicap in Mexico. Phar Lap's trainers mixed him tonics to improve his performance, the recipes for which included cocaine, caffeine, strychnine and belladonna as well as arsenic. Now, his insides were haemorrhaged, intestines and stomach ruptured with inflammation. Nuar Alsadir says in her book *Animal Joy* that 'we leak truths from our bodies all the time'. Phar Lap's famous muscular expanse lay percolating the substances of its own myth-making through the stiffening surface of his groomed hide.

The horse's body was split up and boxed off to different museums. His skin went to Melbourne, his bones to Wellington and his huge heart (1) to the Australian Institute of Anatomy. Separated pieces sliced into justifiable signifiers of the Phar Lap legend. Each one bleached and conserved and locked into glass from behind which it could be observed.

The wall of his heart's left ventricle was cut out during examination. The massive, cleanly butchered organ still swims in its plastic chamber of piss-yellow formalin; locked into a bespoke shock-proof, light-sensitive rectangular tank to delay the eventual inevitable disintegration into a dense death slop. Peak, juicy cardiovascular prowess reduced now to a cadaverous death mask whiskered with fat and yawning with dissection like a drowning wrinkled face. Cutting, partitioning, splitting, pickling and compartmentalising; archiving actions attempt to see and explain the mechanics of Phar Lap's success. They lay bare a physical desire to get inside him.

In the Sumerian poem *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*, the Mesopotamian goddess Inanna sends a bull to attack Gilgamesh and his companion Enkidu (2). They destroy the bull by splitting its skull with an axe. Again, clean human cuts are administered as a mode of cleaving beast into conquered sections. Enkidu weeps while he separates the animal's body into parts:

He consigned its hide to the streets, he consigned its intestines to the broad square, and the widows' sons of his city each took their share of its meat in baskets. He consigned its carcass to the knacker's, and turned its two horns into flasks for pouring fine oil (3).

The splitting of the animal happens simultaneously with the splitting of the man. Tears are themselves a kind of separation of coherent self into smaller escaping pieces. Enkidu divides up the body of his animal enemy and aligns this exertion with the division of his own personhood, feeding the bodies of his people with meat which has come to represent his flesh. When we dismantle the animal body we recognise and understand something about ourselves in the entrails (4).

This understanding is a confrontation of the animal parts of our experience that we edit out of the day-to-day. We present each other with abstracted, clean avatars which syphon into a sealed vault the liquid functions gurgling through our guts and bladders and leaking from the orifices we have wrapped in packages of cotton and lace. These liquid functions exist like Phar Lap's heart, locked inside artificial tanks of jaundiced fluid, stacked in the underground stores beneath the museums of our curated public personalities.

On a recent trip to Ibiza I stayed in a room with my friend where the bathroom had no door, just a sheet of sliding glass with a narrow frosted panel across the middle. We shrieked about this when we saw it, and then instantly got used to emptying and washing and shaving our bodies on display in this back-lit glass box. Occasionally we bring one of our concealed tanks up into the daylight in a choreographed action of controlled intimacy, but it is quickly returned back to the vaulted darkness afterwards. Nonetheless, there are seams in these tanks and the threat of a leak lingers on the heaving shelves.

When we deal with another person...we erase, abstract from the image of the other person or partner certain features which are simply too embarrassing to be kept in mind all the time. I talk to you - of course, rationally, I know you are defecating, you are sweating, not to mention other things - but, quite literally, when



I interact with you, this is not part of the image I have of you. So when I deal with you, I am basically not dealing with the real you. I am dealing with the virtual image of you. And this image has reality in the sense that it nonetheless structures the way I am dealing with you.

- Slavoj Žižek

This boxing up of our leaking facets might be artificial, but it is also one of the ways we imagine that we distinguish ourselves from animals; who fuck and shit and piss and cough up globs of detritus in one unpunctuated trajectory of embodiment.

In an online word-referencing forum in 2007 a user called Broff posted: 'Up on his haunches is an equestrian term that denotes a horse whose hindquarters are well engaged under the mass of his body for maximum impulsion and collection.' There is a verticality to the ways in which the back part of the body of a premium racehorse is praised. wehorse.com defines impulsion in a dressage context as a 'powerful thrust' (5).

The body of the horse is here divided into separate sections. The first is the horizontal skeletal form that we recognise as animal in its stance and skin and hide. The second is the knot of upwardly thrusting haunch, personified and mechanised through an eroticised (humanising) language of verticality. The haunch is a separate powerful force pushing upwards against the animal mass of bone and stomach and hair.

Language boxes up this animal body to bring it closer to our own, narrowing the bestial gap. Like Žižek's abstracted compartmentalisation in human encounters, equestrian judging vocabulary separates the horizontal animality of the horse's four-legged form from the muscular upward-standing thrust of its hind legs. Words make a man out of a specific section of the beast. This section is where equestrians begin judgement of the animal's athleticism, but also where we are most likely to see ourselves and focus any human eroticisms.

Alsadir claims that quality of life is not dictated by the horizontal timeline of our experiences. She focuses instead on vertical time; the *jouissance* of 'a moment's surrender'. This happens just at the uppermost boundary of physical and emotional crescendo where pain begins.

If *jouissance* means a Lacanian fracturing of the subject (6), a splitting beyond the parameters of regulated pleasure, then again the idea of separation is what holds erotic potential.

Phar Lap's horizontality of posture and stride in his racing prowess is countered by the verticality of his death, the moment of *jouissance* beyond the exertion of peak athletic strain and bursting rupture of suddenly overdosing on a poisonous substance to that end. For us, the consumer of the Phar Lap story, perhaps a vertical *jouissance* moment comes from daring linguistically to site erotic interest in the rear legs of an animal, testing desire beyond the usual boundary of accepted pleasure signifiers.

Yvonne Kroonenberg draws an explicit link between 'the flanks and the thighs' of a horse and the allure of riding for young women (7). Her point is problematic in that it relies on describing all horses as representing masculine sexuality, and all young women as seeking that out. But still, she carves the back legs from the rest of the animal in order to feed them into her corporeal awakening narrative. Splitting and boxing and butchery produce vitally cleaved, bleeding pieces of human creativity and strangeness to be mosaic-ed into the virtual image we want to project. But as we collage them together in art or by living, the truths leak out from where we have cut them whether we like it or not.

Alsadir says in her book that everyone is and should be entangled in their environment: 'A self that is severed from others and its environment will have limited energy entering or leaving its system and will become depleted'. The drive to separate the things, bodies, animals we can see is a drive to bring those sliced parts back together again but with something of ourselves wedged inside. To look down the collapsing arteries of Phar Lap's heart or pour oil from inside the horn of the Bull of Heaven or site familiar attraction in the vertical masculinity of hind legs is to carve out a tiny channel from the material of the environment and spit into it with a sip of our own experiences. If we are to be as entangled in the environment as (im)possible, we must smear ourselves between the separated pieces.

(1)



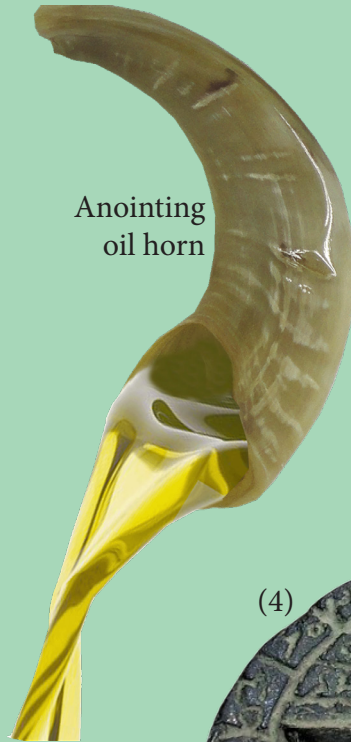
Phar Lap's heart

(2)



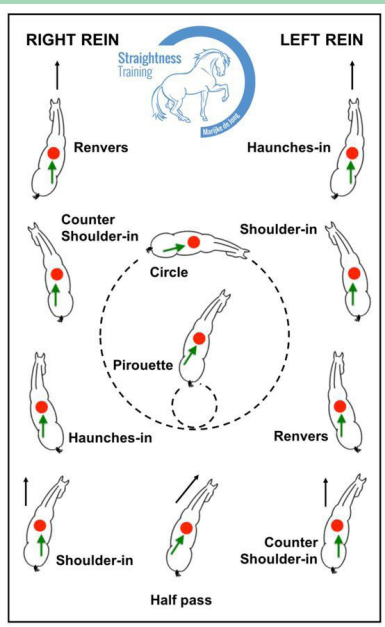
The Bull of Heaven

(3)



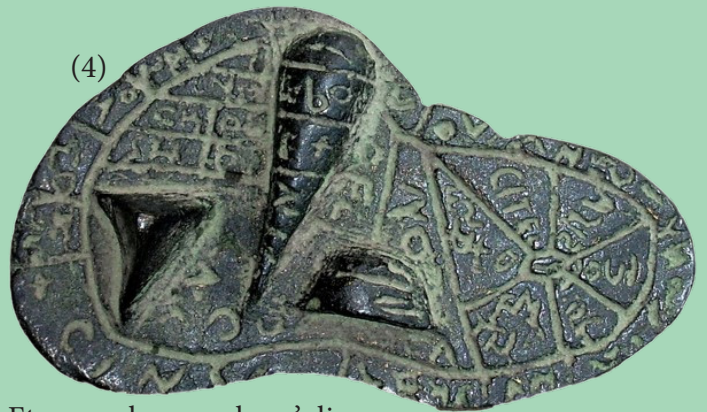
Anointing oil horn

(5)



Dressage directions

(4)



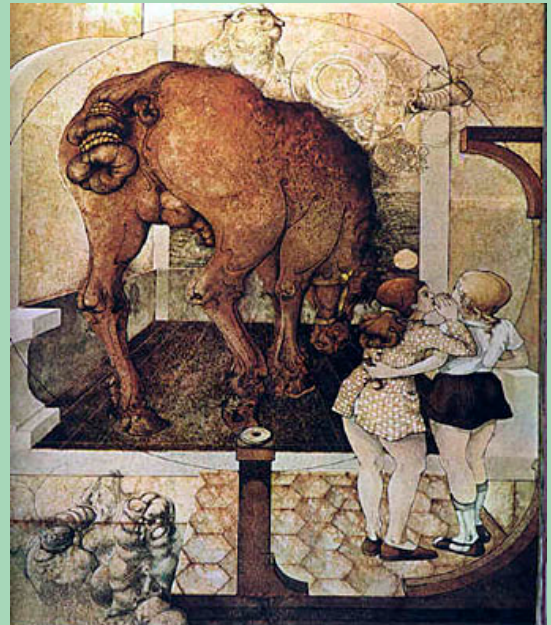
Etruscan bronze sheep's liver,
The Liver of Piacenza

(6)



Jacques Lacan as a toddler in Paris

(7)



Jean-Marie Poumeyrol, *Giggling*